

# The Fourth Church Pulpit

## THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE

February 7, 1993

John M. Buchanan

FOURTH  
PRESBY  
TERIAN  
CHURCH



A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611-2094  
Phone: 312.787.4570  
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture: Isaiah 58:6-9; Matthew 5:13-16

Text: "You are the light of the world . . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."  
Matthew 5:14,16 (NRSV)

"This Little Light of Mine — I'm Gonna Let It Shine..."

"You're not going to sing it, are you?" The question came from my brother in Wichita. We were talking on the phone last week and he asked, as he often does, "What are you preaching on this Sunday?" When I told him "This Little Light of Mine" he laughed and remembered as I do, being shipped off to Daily Vacation Bible School at the First Baptist Church — which was always held the first few weeks of summer vacation and thus provided a blessed gradual transition period for mothers about to confront the stark reality of children at home — full time — for three months.

At Daily Vacation Bible School, the Baptists were inventive, to say the least. We saw puppet shows of the resurrection, flannel graphs of Jesus walking on water and Peter sinking, there were brass quartets and piano duets, and craft time in which you could burn the cross of Jesus into a block of soft pine wood and then paint it gold, and scripture memorization contests with prizes. And the music . . .

"I got the Joy, Joy, Joy, deep in my heart"

"Do Lord, Oh Do Lord, Oh Do Remember Me"

"What a Friend We have in Jesus" and

"This Little Light of Mine"

"This little light of mine,  
I'm gonna let it shine.  
This little light of mine,  
I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine.  
Let it shine, let it shine.

"Hide it under a bushel, No!  
I'm gonna let it shine.  
Hide it under a bushel, No!  
I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine.  
Let it shine, Let it shine."

We won't sing it, but I know that if you ever sang that song, if you were shipped out to Daily Vacation Bible School where you sang it, you're going to be humming it all day — as I've been humming it all week.

The relevance of that little song is that it faithfully addresses, in simple and clear terms, a problem that has existed for the friends and followers of Jesus for 2,000 years; namely the temptation to retreat from, withdraw from, back away from, turn your back on, the world, in his name and for his sake.

It is perhaps the most persistent heresy throughout Christian history: the notion that in order to be faithful to Jesus you have to withdraw from the world; the notion that the religious life is an intentionally other-worldly life; and that whatever else Christians are about they certainly don't go around calling attention to themselves; that hiding whatever light you have under the bushel is properly modest and appropriately humble. There is even a theology of withdrawal from the world.

Robert Farar Capon, a witty Episcopal theologian writes:

"There is a habit that plagues many so-called spiritual minds; they imagine that matter and spirit are somehow at odds with each other and that the right course for human life is to escape from the world into some finer and purer (and undoubtedly duller) realm. . . that is a crashing mistake. It was God who invented (the world) . . . God who at the end of each day of creation pronounced a resounding 'Good!' And it is God's unrelenting love of all the stuff of this world that keeps it in being at every moment."

[*The Supper of the Lamb*, xii]

Jesus was clear about it. The way Matthew tells the story, the first thing Jesus did to get his work started was recruit a band of followers, take them up onto a mountain, sit down in their midst, in the classic posture of rabbi and student, and teach them what he was about and what he was inviting them to do.

The first thing he says to them, according to Matthew, is a series of statements that are stunning and radical. We know them as the Beatitudes:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit.  
Blessed are the meek, the hungry,  
the pure in heart, the peace makers,  
the persecuted."

Those statements are so very different from the way things actually are, that the natural response to them — blessed are the meek . . . the peacemakers — is "Oh yeah? Not in this world . . . maybe in some other world . . . in heaven maybe . . . or some isolated place out in the wilderness . . . but not in this world are the meek and poor and hungry blessed." The first and most natural response to Jesus was the assumption that he wants his followers to withdraw from the world. There is scholarly speculation that the disciples always thought that was a good idea — namely, a kind of monastic community in the desert with Jesus as its leader where they could talk about these things and live like he wanted them to live, turning the other cheek, loving neighbor as self, forgiving. There — isolated from all the ambiguities of human life, things like earning a living, paying bills, making love, having babies, obeying laws — the true and Christian life could be lived faithfully. Or if that is not practical, the true and Christian life is a matter of the heart, an internal, invisible thing, a matter of personal spirituality.

So the very next thing Jesus says to his new followers — after he had told them how blessed it is to be poor, meek, hungry and pure of heart — is to go public with it. Come out with it. You are the salt of the earth! Even more dramatic in terms of visibility, you are the light of the world; no one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel. "Let your light so shine that they may see your good works and give glory to God."

There are libraries written about those two metaphors and a flood of sermonistic words invested in them. Notice simply the nuance. Salt and light do not exist for themselves. Each takes on its essential nature when interacting with the environment. In a sense, salt becomes salt when it goes to work and starts changing whatever it touches — preserving, cleansing, seasoning, fertilizing. Light is only light against some background of darkness.

In reality, however, we are still frequently persuaded that real religion — authentic Christianity — is more a matter of personal, private spirituality. "What I believe is between God and me." "Religion and politics don't mix." "My faith is like a quiet refuge away from the noise of life."

The late Hugh T. Kerr, editor of *Theology Today*, was working on a book about contemporary spirituality when he died. He noted that there's a strong appeal to private spirituality, the notion that we need first to get into ourselves, to explore our own interiors, and that in order to do that we must get away from the world. So retreat centers are fully booked, shelves are full of titles on how to get into yourself, how to meditate, how to learn from the mystics and gurus. How to deal with your personal demons and addictions and dependencies. X

There is, of course, important truth here. There is spirit, soul, in each of us which may be largely unexplored. There is, I have come to believe because I have witnessed it so many times, a spiritual reality, a depth, a beauty, that goes unrealized, unrecognized, unappreciated, in most of us. Upwardly mobile, hard working, type A, urban Christians are mostly too busy to deal with matters of the spirit. So yes, there is a lot to be learned and gained by acknowledging our own internal realities, and making time for the exploration and intentionally pulling back from the tension and pressure and unrelenting drive in order to get acquainted with our own soul.

But that is only half the truth and left uncorrected leads to a Christianity isolated from and irrelevant to the life we have lived most of the time. "You are the light of the world . . . Let your light so shine." The other half of the truth is that Jesus Christ is followed in the world, that acts of compassion and mercy and justice in the world are the ways his friends live out their faith and that you and I become fully human and fully Christian as we live out, in the world, what we believe and who we are in our hearts.

And there is here a clear direction for the church of Jesus Christ. We exist for the sake of the world. A church that does not define its life in terms of the world around it is as irrelevant as a candle on a bright sunny afternoon, or salt which never touches anything. Church people are inclined to think that mission programs of caring and helping and advocating are extra-curricular, add-on options after you have done everything else. But here Jesus is saying that the fundamental nature of the church has to do with being salt and light in the world.

And so, as we have thought about what it means to be a church anywhere, but particularly what it means to be this church in this place, we have said, "We are a light in the city": and we have set out to be salt and light...to change, preserve, season — to illuminate and clarify, and to make safe and bright something of the world God has called us to love — and *fertilize*. Leonard Sweet says that one of the major functions of salt in the ancient world was to fertilize acidic soil . . . and that that's what the church should be about; a provocative metaphor! It reminds me of something Mark Twain once said about preachers: namely, that they're a lot like manure; get them together in one place and they raise a stink, but spread out on the land they do a lot of good.

So the viability and faithfulness of the church may always be measured by the effect — the force of its presence — the saltiness of its ministry — the light of its mission.

"This little light of mine,  
I'm gonna let it shine. . . ."

Who me? My little light? What if I don't have any? What if I feel like I need some light in my darkness? What if my life is a day-to-day, hour-by-hour struggle to keep my head above water? What if I'm not powerful, an influential executive or prominent politician? What possible light can I personally shine on anything? Who hasn't thought like that?

I think maybe the light Jesus wants you and me to shine is whatever it is that burns brightly inside of us. I think it means that somewhere inside each one of us is a place of bright light, a place of deep caring and passion, and strong love and courage — because God put it there.

Each of us, I believe, has light to shine. Sometimes that's hard to believe. When Jesus looked at that motley band of fishermen and tax collectors and homemakers — Mary Magdalene, Martha, Peter, Andrew — and said, "You are the light of the world," I'm convinced they too had trouble believing it. But they were somehow — in spite of their self doubts and obvious weaknesses and their failures and infidelities and betrayals — the light of the world and the world has never been the same since.

We are not all powerful executives or influential politicians or brilliant thinkers, so I don't know what your light is, but I believe you have it because God gave it to you. It is whatever burns brightly in your soul; it may be your conscience at the way things are done at work; your discomfort with the way someone is being treated; your concern for something in the community; or it may be your gift which you have been hiding — your poetry, music, art; or it may be your love for children, grandchildren, nieces/nephews, all the children; or for your significant other; or for your neighbor who needs you; or for God. I believe it is a matter of utmost importance for you and me to know what our light is and to let it shine — so that others may see God.

*light in retirement — (Sammy)*

As I was thinking about this, I heard from a minister friend, Phyllis Koehnline, about the wife of another friend. He is the pastor of a North Shore congregation. She is his wife — they have joined two families together and they have six children. Her name is Jan. She is bright, beautiful, full of incredible energy, a superb musician, a successful composer, a passionate lover of life. She has Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's disease. We all know about her. We think about her and pray for her and every now and then call her husband to encourage them.

Jan's disease has pretty thoroughly immobilized her. She has movement only in her left forearm and fingers and some head movement. Phyllis was worried that the visit might be difficult and conversation uncomfortable for Jan. She told me she hardly got a word in. Jan communicates by way of a laptop computer, with the fingers of her left hand doing the talking, and the words were popping up on the screen, Phyllis said.

She's writing a book about her experience. She starts each day by asking God what her assignment is for that day — and then she writes.

Phyllis mustered her courage and asked, "What will you do when you can't move your fingers?" And Jan told her about a computer activated by eye movement that she plans to use to continue her writing.

And I thought about Jesus telling his friends that they are the light of the world and I thought about what a sorry thing it is to be healthy and whole and full of love and potential passion, full of strength and untried courage — and actually to be wondering whether or not I have a light to shine, or to be too afraid to let it shine. And I thought about this sanctuary this morning and all the power and love and passion which would gather here; and I thought about the miracles which would start happening if Jesus somehow walked in here and looked all of us in the eye and said, "You are the light of the world, let your light shine."

And I thought maybe each of us ought to go through the rest of this day at least, singing —

"This little light of mine,  
I'm gonna let it shine. . . ."

Amen.